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ABSTRACT

This briefing paper provides 3-year trend data on Arizona school counselors' use of time. They hypothesis is that if career guidance were to be emphasized in the schools in accordance with the School-To-Work Act, a shift in counselors' roles could be expected to reflect more time spend on career guidance. An overview of the survey is provided including methodology and respondent characteristics. Data for each year includes counselors' allocation of time to counseling students, working with teachers and guidance curriculum, responding to crises, providing system support, and non-guidance activities. Although the pattern of time use has remained stable over three years, non-guidance and system support time have decreased in favor of guidance activities. Changes are small. Percentage of time spent in student counseling is further analyzed by issues. Counselor awareness of the School-To-Work initiative and their job satisfaction has increased. However, no significant changes in counselors' roles or duties were found in spite of considerable professional development efforts at state and local levels. These results are compared with the Comprehensive Competency-Based Guidance model, and sound practice in school counseling is discussed. Policy questions are raised. (EMK)

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Are Arizona Public Schools Making the Best Use of School Counselors? Results of a Three-Year Study of Counselors' Time Use

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Are Arizona Public Schools Making the Best Use of School Counselors? Results of a Three-Year Study of Counselors' Time Use

Arizona School To Work Briefing Paper #16 *April 1999*

by Judith A. Vandegrift, Morrison Institute for Public Policy

Since spring 1996, School To Work (STW) partnerships in each of Arizona's 15 counties have worked toward creating a *comprehensive statewide system* of opportunities for Arizona students to help them more meaningfully connect what they learn in school with the "world of work." The authorizing legislation for these partnerships — the *School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994* — suggests that one element of such a system is career counseling for ***all*** students.

Morrison Institute for Public Policy, on behalf of the Arizona Department of Commerce, School To Work Division (ADC-STW), is coordinating a multi-faceted study of the state's STW initiative. The purpose of the overall study is to document educational changes that occur during the implementation phase of STW. In order to examine these changes, baseline data collected prior to STW implementation are being compared with measures over time. The study seeks to examine what changes, if any, occur over time that can reasonably be associated with STW system-building efforts.

One facet of the study concerns Arizona public school counselors and their roles and responsibilities. The hypothesis is that ***if*** career guidance were to be emphasized in the schools (in accordance with 1994 Act), ***then*** one might see a shift in counselors' roles over time to reflect more time spent on counseling activities related to career guidance. Baseline measures of counselor's time use were established in 1996 and updated in 1997.[1] This briefing paper provides three-year trend data on Arizona school counselors and is the final study of the series.

An Overview of the Counselor Survey

The original counselor survey was designed in collaboration with the ADC-STW and an independent polling firm—Wright Consulting Services—and modified for subsequent years as a result of input by staff of the Arizona Counselors' Academy (ACA). A primary purpose of the survey for all three years has been to determine 1) how counselors spend their time and 2) the nature of counseling services provided to students. Secondary purposes of the study have been to examine counselors' awareness of and support for the School To Work initiative and job satisfaction.

Methodology and Respondent Characteristics

In the fall of 1998, 1,327 surveys were mailed to public school counselors using a counselor directory compiled by the Arizona Department of Education. A total of 668 usable surveys were returned and analyzed. This response is the highest since the survey was initiated (up from 374 responses in 1996 and 467 in 1997).[2]

The sample size yields results that are statistically accurate with a 95% level of confidence. The margin of error is ± 3.9 percentage points.

The demographic characteristics of the 1998 sample parallel those of previous years. Counselors from all 15 counties are represented. About one-third are men; 17% represent minorities. Respondents have the following characteristics:

- Most (94%) work full time and are experienced counselors, having practiced their profession for at least one year.
- Most (88%) also are certified as guidance counselors and/or have a counseling endorsement.
- Over half (60%) have attended the Arizona Counselors' Academy at least once to upgrade their knowledge and skills.
- 56% are members of a professional guidance counseling association.

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A majority of respondents (52%) work with students in grades 9-12. Of the remaining respondents, 24% each report working with students in either the elementary grades or middle/junior high school. Similar to previous years, 22% of the 1998 respondents work in schools with fewer than 600 students, while 43% work in schools with enrollments between 600 and 1,500 students. The remaining 35% work in schools with enrollments exceeding 1,500. Among all respondents, 11% indicate being the only counselor for the district, irrespective of grade level or size.

There are no radical changes since 1996 in how counseling duties are organized or distributed. Most schools assign counselors by grade level (40%) or alphabetically by the student's last name (34%). Four percent of the counselors surveyed indicate that their primary charge is to provide career counseling and/or Comprehensive Competency-Based Guidance (CCBG) — a state-endorsed approach to guidance counseling.

Counselors' Use of Time

Each year, counselors have been asked to indicate — for an "average" academic year — the percent of their overall duties allocated to the following tasks:

- counseling **students** (e.g., one-on-one);
- working with teachers to facilitate guidance activities in the classroom/planning, developing and delivering **curriculum**;
- responding to **crises**;
- providing "**system support**" such as preparing budgets, attending meetings, and so forth; and
- "**non-guidance**" activities (e.g., class scheduling).

[Note: Words in bold correspond to the legend in Table 1.]

Table 1 shows a stable pattern of time use over the three year period. One-on-one student counseling accounts for the single greatest allocation of time among counselors for all three years. This is followed by time spent either planning, developing or delivering curriculum and/or working with teachers to facilitate guidance activities in the classroom, responding to crises, non-guidance activities, and time spent on "system support."

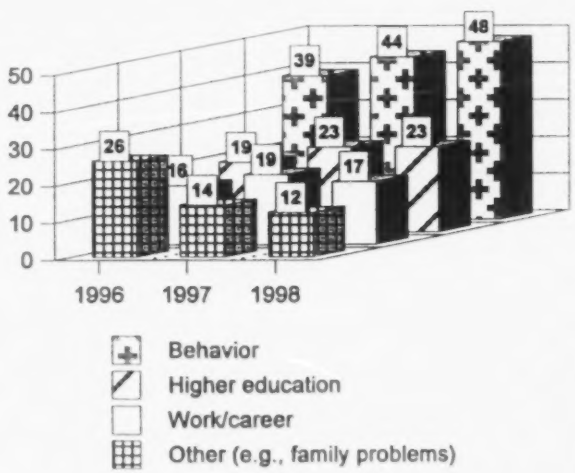
Table 1
Distribution of Arizona counselors' time by activity

Counselor Role— working with	1996	1997	1998
Students	37	37	38.3
Curriculum	18*	21.4	24.4
Crises	18	14.4	14.6
Non-guidance	16	14.4	14.6
System support	11	8.4	8.1

* Item did not include teacher facilitation in 1996

In terms of working one-on-one with students, each year counselors are asked to indicate the nature of the counseling they provide related to four issues: (1) student behavior, (2) higher education, (3) work/career, and (4) "other" (e.g., personal/family problems). Figure 1 shows the distribution of time reportedly spent counseling students on specific issues for 1996-1998, and illustrates that most one-on-one counseling time is spent on student behavior. In fact, the time reportedly spent on behavioral counseling has risen annually (from 39% in 1996 to 48% in 1998) and the increase is statistically significant. Conversely, counseling on "other issues" has decreased annually.

Figure 1
Student counseling: Percentage of time spent by issue



Between 1996 and 1997, there appeared to be a modest increase in the amount of time spent working with students on postsecondary issues — either higher education or work/career issues. The time spent on these issues reported in 1998 does not vary significantly from 1997. Counseling on higher education remains at 23% while counseling on work/career issues dips slightly (from 19% to 17%).

Counselors' Awareness of and Support for STW

In the first year of the study (1996), 90% of the counselors surveyed said that they had heard about the STW initiative and 93% indicated support for it. In 1998 — with a response rate nearly double that of 1996 — 95% of the counselors surveyed are aware of the STW initiative and 96% support it (51% strongly supportive; 45% supportive).

Counselors' Job Satisfaction

Most counselors responding to the survey in 1998 are either "very" (37%) or "somewhat" (47%) satisfied working in Arizona's public school system — a finding similar to previous years. Moreover, job satisfaction relative to working with different groups has risen steadily over time as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Counselor satisfaction by constituent group

Group	% "somewhat" to "very" satisfied		
	1996	1997	1998
Teachers	73.2	88.5	93.1
Principals	71.6	82.0	86.9
District administrators	52.5	67.0	67.8
Local businesses	65.4	80.6	88.5
Parents	60.5	81.2	83.8

Between 1996 and 1997, increases in counselor satisfaction rose significantly for all five groups. Between 1997 and 1998, the percentages of counselors who report being satisfied working with teachers, principals, and local businesses rose significantly. Notably, the percentage of counselors who report being satisfied in working with local businesses has risen by 23.1%, ranking fourth in 1996 and second in 1998.

Summary and Discussion

Counselors polled in all three years are very similar. Most work with high school students, in schools with enrollments between 600 and 1,500 and have caseloads exceeding 300 students. Yet despite consistently high caseloads, most counselors report being satisfied working in Arizona's public school system and with various constituent groups.

Three years of data on counselors' time use reveal a stable trend. That is, counselors consistently report spending most of their time working individually with students — typically on behavioral problems. Postsecondary counseling (including counseling on higher education and work/career options) has fluctuated over time, but not significantly. Post-secondary counseling consistently accounts for about for 15% (± 2) of a counselor's overall duties with between six to seven percent of this counseling devoted to work/career issues.

Since the 1998 survey represents the final year of a three year study, it is important to revisit the reason for conducting the study. To reiterate the original hypothesis, it was proposed that *if* career guidance were to be emphasized in the schools (in accordance with 1994 Act), ***then*** one might see a shift in counselors' roles over time to reflect more time spent on counseling activities related to career guidance. In sum, three years of data suggest that there have been no significant changes in counselors' roles or duties over time, including the provision of career counseling. This is in spite of considerable professional development efforts at both state and local levels.

Although counselor data suggest that the STW initiative has not prompted any significant changes in how counselors spend their time, the original assumption that counseling *should change* because of the initiative might have been faulty. The more relevant question may be one of whether the time spent on career counseling is, in fact, appropriate rather than whether there should be more of it.

To answer this question, counselors' time usage is compared against the state model for Comprehensive Competency-Based Guidance (CCBG). The CCBG model recommends how counselors be employed to maximize their ability to provide student guidance, and so provides a framework for assessing Arizona counselors' time use. Table 3[1] compares Arizona

Table 3

Arizona counselors' time use: A comparison with CCBG recommendations

Delivery Strategy	CCBG Range	AZ % (Actual)
Developing/ facilitating guidance curriculum	25-50%	24.4%
Individual academic/career planning (1-on-1 counseling including higher education and work/career issues)	5-35%	15.3%
Responsive services (crisis counseling and 1-on-1 counseling for behavioral and "other" issues)	20-30%	37.6%
System support	10-15%	8.1%
Non-guidance	0%	14.6%

Note: CCBG ranges allow for difference among counselors depending on grade level served. Percentages do not add up to 100. Non-responses (missing data) are not reported.

counselors' reported (actual) time use with CCBG recommendations.

Table 3 suggests that the amount of time spent by Arizona counselors working individually with students on personal and career development (15.3%) is within CCBG guidelines. However, it is considered a relatively high allocation of time if younger students are involved and, conversely, a low allocation if dealing with older students.

Table 3 also shows that Arizona counselors spend a relatively low amount of time on two important activities: developing, or facilitating the presentation of, guidance curriculum (24.4%) and system support such as outreach and management activities (8.1%).

On the other hand, Arizona counselors spend more time than recommended responding to crises and student behavior (37.6%) and on non-guidance activities (14.6%).

This analysis of counselors' time usage using CCBG guidelines raises several issues and prompts some policy questions. One issue is that counselors may, in fact, be providing an appropriate amount of individual academic and career guidance (since the overall allocation of time is within CCBG guidelines). Thus, one might conclude that not finding any changes in this type of counseling over time could, at least in part, be attributable to the fact that changes are not necessary. On the other hand, it is equally probable that academic and career counseling — especially for older students (recommended to account for up to 35% of a counselor's time) — is taking a "back seat" to other issues such as responsive services.

In fact, the amount of time devoted to responsive services (nearly 40% of Arizona counselors' total time use) prompts the following question:

> ***Is it sound practice for counseling to be reactive or should it be more proactive?***

A proactive approach to counseling means that schools would employ counselors' talents and abilities differently to reduce or prevent behavioral difficulties, rather than react once they occur. A growing body of literature suggests that students are less likely to misbehave in school when learning is relevant and they are engaged. If counselors were used more in the capacity of developing/facilitating guidance curriculum and working with students to develop postsecondary plans, might students' behavioral difficulties occur less frequently, thus reducing the need for reacting to these issues?

There will always be circumstances that warrant responsive services. However, the question is whether schools could, in fact, reduce the need for behavioral counseling by improving the quality and nature of educational services.

Of course, using counselors in more proactive capacity suggests redirecting their time. The most obvious place to start is to ***not*** use counselors for "non-guidance" activities, thus "freeing up" approximately 15% of their time. The policy issue is as follows:

> ***Is it the most judicious use of public funds for counselors to spend up to 15% of their time performing "non-guidance" activities?***

The corollary question is: "Can these functions be performed by other staff (e.g., qualified clerical staff)? A simple cost-benefit analysis helps in beginning to answer these questions. The median counselor salary in Arizona is $27,000.[7] The median salary of a school secretary is $20,600. Fifteen percent of a counselor's wages is $4,050, while 15% of a secretary's wages is $3,090—a difference of nearly $1000.

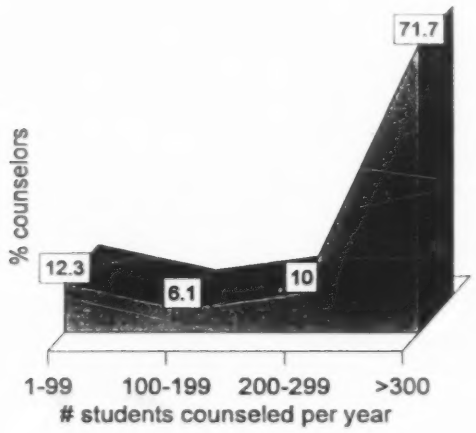
If all 1,327 Arizona public school counselors (who comprise the state's counselor directory) are spending an average of 15% of their time on non-guidance activities, this represents an investment of some $5 million. Assuming non-guidance activities such as class scheduling could be performed by secretarial staff, Arizona taxpayers currently are paying 100 times more (or over $1 million) for these services to be performed by Master's-degreed professionals. Moreover, time spent on non-guidance activities clearly is time ***not*** spent working with students, faculty and staff.

Finally, irrespective of how counselors spend their time, this three-year study prompts one last question:

> ***How effective can one expect counselors to be given their caseloads?***

Three years of data on Arizona counselors' caseloads shows that nearly three out of every four counselors in 1997-1998 (up from two-thirds in 1996) are responsible for more than 300 students. Arizona counselors' caseloads have been, and remain, high. The caseload distribution is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Arizona counselors' student caseloads (n = 660)



The American School Counselor Association recommends a maximum caseload of 1:300. This recommendation is endorsed by the College Board, national associations for both Elementary and Secondary Principals, and the National Board of Certified Counselors.

In conclusion, three years of data on the overall nature of counselors' duties and counselors' time use suggest that the nature of counseling has not changed much since implementing the STW systems-building initiative. But this finding begs the question of what, if anything, ***has*** changed?

Since the state's STW initiative began in spring 1996:

- Counselors have become increasingly aware of the STW initiative.
- Virtually all (96%) counselors are supportive of the initiative.
- The percentage of counselors who are satisfied working in the public schools has risen annually.

Most notably, perhaps, is that the percentage of counselors who report being satisfied in working with local businesses has risen significantly — over 20% — since the beginning of the STW initiative. A major goal of the state's STW partnerships has been to recruit businesses and promote their involvement in education. Data suggest that partnerships have been successful in these endeavors to date. Increased counselor satisfaction with the business community ***may*** be attributable, at least in part, to STW efforts.

Where To Go From Here

The preceding discussion suggests an agenda for Arizona public school counselors, the education community and Arizona policymakers, should they choose to develop one. Recommendations are as follows:

Arizona public schools should not use qualified counselors for non-guidance activities.

> Using degreed professionals for activities outside the realm of their expertise is a waste of time, talent, and dollars. It is analogous to paying one's physician to schedule medical appointments. If the nature of non-guidance activities require skills beyond those of qualified clerical staff, then —

The Arizona Department of Education and/or State Board of Community Colleges should consider developing a career path/credential for counseling paraprofessionals.

A certificate program, similar to legal paraprofessionals or medical assistants, could be developed to "fill the gap" should there be a bona fide need for specific skills that are currently unavailable in schools' secretarial pools. Or, a special endorsement might be developed to upgrade the skills of qualified clerical staff to perform specific functions.

The Arizona Department of Education, in conjunction with the Arizona Counselors Academy, should facilitate the development of a unified message from counselors to communicate clearly with all constituents their stance on providing career guidance in Arizona schools.

This recommendation is based on the maxim that one gets what one asks for. It does not appear that counselors have been very vocal in advocating their position regarding the provision of career counseling in Arizona schools. Perhaps it is time to take a public position and begin advocating for it more assertively.

Counselors' support for School To Work initiatives indicate that they believe that providing career counseling in the schools "adds value" to education. Under the School To Work umbrella, career counseling is intended to assist students identify career choices and options as well as to identify postsecondary opportunities that best match their career interests — be it continuing education, a registered apprenticeship program, or some other option.

The state-endorsed framework of Comprehensive Competency-Based Guidance promotes career counseling. Within the CCBG framework, counselors may work with individual students on postsecondary planning *or*, preferably, work with teachers to implement appropriate classroom-based curriculum on career exploration. The latter approach allows for much greater exposure of students to career activities than afforded by one-on-one counselin

Data collected since 1996 suggest that the CCBG framework is ***not*** very visible within the schools as a tool or method for providing guidance counseling. If this is the state's endorsed framework, to what extent it is philosophically embraced by the counseling community? And, to what extent can it be parlayed into a formal agenda to reform counseling in Arizona?

Finally, **the Arizona Department of Education should consider introducing a policy recommendation and/or legislation to reduce the caseloads of Arizona counselors.**

It is doubtful that counselors can fully utilize their unique talents and abilities when they are charged with providing services to more than 300 students each. Similar to the recently proposed legislation to reduce class sizes, counselors may wish to advocate for a "cap" on the number of students assigned to them.

Endnotes

1. First and second year data are summarized in Arizona STW Briefing Papers #4 (January 1997) and #11 (May 1998).
2. In part, the higher response rate may be attributable to the development (since 1996) by the Arizona Department of Education of a formal directory of school counselors from which the sample is now drawn.
3. Table 3 prorates the 38.3% of time that Arizona counselors spend on one-on-one counseling delivery strategy.
4. Salary figures are from America's Career Info Net: Occupation Report (www.acinet.org). Median salaries are for 1996.

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Arizona's SCHOOLTOWORK SYSTEM

For additional information about
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School To Work is a division of the Arizona Department of Commerce, Office of Workforce Development Policy.

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